

WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

(version 4/2019)



View into Coffee Creek from the proposed Everson CE.

1. **Region:** 4 **Regional Supervisor:** Gary Bertellotti
Name of Applicant(s): Sonja Andersen
2. **Date:** 06/11/2019
3. **Project Name:** Everson Bench CE **Type of Project:** Conservation Easement
4. **Size:** 440 acres (deeded), 1506 acres (leased; BLM)
5. **Location:** ~15 miles north/northwest of Denton, Fergus Co., Region 4, HD 426
6. **Map(s):** See Figures 1 through 3 below proposal text
7. **Project Need:**
This proposed conservation easement (CE) consists of 440 acres along Everson Bench, an expanse of relatively gently-topographic, fertile agricultural and sagebrush-grasslands juxtaposed with the steep badlands of the Coffee and Arrow Creek Breaks (Figure 1). This property serves as a gateway to these breaks—one largely inaccessible to the public, that provides some of the best mule deer and upland game bird habitat (primarily sharp-tailed grouse) in central Montana. Elk have also begun expanding into this area as their populations in HDs 471 and 426 continue to increase.

Because of its habitat values for deer, elk, pronghorn, upland game birds, and numerous non-game species, and its historical significance (referenced as “Slaughter Creek” in Lewis and Clarks’ journals), the Arrow Creek Breaks are highly-valued for hunting and other recreational pursuits. Most of the lands within the Arrow Creek breaks are public—administered by the BLM within the confines of the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument (UMBNM), designated in 2001 to protect the area’s wild, scenic, and historic character. The DNRC also administers some of these lands. The mouth of Coffee Creek, accessible by this property, is also largely public land (BLM). However, while predominantly public land, this area is primarily inaccessible to the public—it is land-locked by private land with no legal rights-of-way into the area. The Moline Ranch CE, approximately 6 miles north of this proposed CE and purchased by MFWP in 2010, provides public access to a portion of these breaks, but a large swath (8,230 acres BLM plus 960 acres DNRC) remains inaccessible to any guaranteed public hunting or recreational use. Acquisition of a CE on the Glass property will provide perpetual public access to these roughly 9,000 acres of public lands (Figure 2).

This same area comprises the heart of the HD 426 mule deer trend area, where the Lewistown-area biologist routinely observes the highest mule deer numbers, productivity, and post-season buck:doe ratios of any trend area in the Lewistown district. Elk numbers are expanding in HDs 426 and 471, and more and more hunters seek access to the Arrow and Coffee Creek breaks to pursue this growing resource. The Department, working with partners (e.g., the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Mule Deer Foundation, Pheasants Forever) has an opportunity to purchase a CE on this property for the benefit of present and future generations, while guaranteeing permanent access to an important portion of public land in central Montana.

8. Broad Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Criteria:

- Breakdown of landcover types by acreages and percent (**Bold** indicates Tier I Community Type; Figure 3):
 - **Wetland/Riparian** (<1%)
 - **Great Plains Riparian** (<1%)
 - **Shrub Grassland** (51%)
 - **Big Sagebrush Steppe** (17%)
 - **Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairie** (34%)
 - Intro. Upland Veg – Annual & Biennial Forbland (<1%)
 - Cultivated Crops (40%)
 - **Conifer-dominated Forest & Woodland** (2%)
 - Great Plains Ponderosa Pine Woodland & Savanna (<1%)
 - Great Plains Wooded Draw & Ravine (<1%)
 - Rocky Mtn Foothill Woodland-Steppe Transition (<1%)
 - Breaks/Badlands (3%)
 - Great Plains Badlands (3%)

9. Project Level Criteria

a) **Site-Specific Habitat Values:**

This property's key selling point as a proposed CE is its proximity and access to adjacent, currently land-locked public lands. However, the property itself provides good mule deer and upland game bird habitat (mule deer utilize the agricultural crops, feeding on benches during early morning/late evening and bedding down in the "breaks" during the day; there is also a sharp-tailed grouse lek on the property, and the parcel itself provides some of the area's brood-rearing and nesting habitat). The Glass property is also located within the SWAP 2015 Arrow Creek and Judith River Terrestrial Focus Areas. Excepting the cultivated crops, this property is 60% SWAP Tier I and II Community Types.

A CE management plan would implement a rest-rotation grazing system to ensure healthy long-term range conditions, likely tying in to the current BLM lease associated with this property. With the leased lands tied to this CE, the footprint for FWP's Minimum Standards for Grazing could include almost 2,000 acres managed for habitat conservation, livestock and wildlife forage, and cover. Additionally, numerous opportunities exist to utilize and leverage Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program (UGBHEP) funds on this proposed CE and adjacent private lands also managed by the current landowner.

b) **Threat Status:** IMMINENT

Another interested buyer has approached the landowner with designs to purchase the property, specifically to tie up access to the adjoining public lands. The landowner is wanting to purchase property in Thailand for farm palm oil, so is looking for an additional source of income to do so. If MFWP fails to acquire a CE on this property, it will be sold to this interested buyer and a rare opportunity for obtaining permanent public access to these lands will disappear.

c) **Focal Priority:**

The proposed CE is entirely located within the boundaries of the 2015 SWAP Arrow Creek Terrestrial Focus Area. While this is not a Tier 1 priority area, the Arrow Creek Breaks is one of the last, best remaining strongholds for mule deer populations in central Montana. With additional expanding elk populations in this district, some landowners in this area are becoming more and more restrictive, engaging in leasing activities. This trend will likely continue and access will be harder to obtain in the future as the recreational value of this area is realized.

In 2003, when commenting on a proposed UMBNM Management Plan, MFWP stressed its concern regarding maintenance of adequate public access to lands within the monument boundary—excepting river floaters and during hunting season, most of the UMBNM receives comparatively little visitation in part due to limited public access. This proposed CE is an opportunity for MFWP gain public access to a unique area of UMBNM lands.

Additionally, the project falls within Priority Area D (which includes Fergus County) of Montana's State Action Plan to protect big game migration routes and winter ranges (particularly for pronghorn, mule deer, and elk) in response to Secretarial Order (SO) 3362.

Finally, this project has involved multiple partners, including the BLM (originally interested in purchasing the property with Land and Water Conservation Funds), and the RMEF. The RMEF is poised to fund this CE, then turn it over to MFWP for management. The Central Montana Chapter of Pheasants Forever (CMPF) has also expressed interest in being involved with this project from a habitat improvement standpoint. The Mule Deer Foundation (MDF) is also a likely partner in this project.

d) Geographic Effectiveness:

The proposed CE consists of one parcel, with the majority of its western and half its northern border adjacent to BLM land. The land is also within 6 aerial miles of the Moline CE, which provides access to a different portion of UMBNM lands. Acquiring a CE on this portion of the Glass property represents a unique opportunity to complement existing and gain new access to the UMBNM and Arrow Creek breaks.

While the overall size of the parcel is small (440 acres) relative to other FWP lands projects, the scope of effectiveness from an access standpoint approaches 10,000 acres (9,190 acres adjacent public lands plus the 440-acre proposed CE; Figure 2). Two points of legal access to and through this land exist from Everson Road, a county road.

e) Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation:

Hunting opportunities for mule deer, white-tailed deer (in the Arrow Creek riparian areas), elk, antelope, and sharp-tailed grouse exists on the Glass property itself or on public lands accessed via this property. Once a CE is acquired, well-established legal access will exist for year-round public use of the property and adjacent public lands. Hiking, horseback riding, lek viewing, snowshoeing, and camping are additional (but not the only) recreational opportunities available within and outside of hunting seasons. The property is an approximately 20-minute drive outside of Denton, and given its proximity to the Moline CE, the Beckman Wildlife Management Area, and a few Block Management Areas, and because few other public access opportunities exist in the vicinity, the parcel and adjacent public lands will likely receive high public interest and use. The steep topography and resultant surface area of the Arrow Creek and Coffee Creek Breaks will afford multiple hunter/recreational use days. The current landowner has allowed public hunting access on the parcel with permission, and hopes that public access is retained in perpetuity on the property regardless of any potential, future owner. Keith Glass has also enrolled his entire ~2,500 acres in MFWP's Block Management Program for the 2019 hunting season.

f) **Management Considerations:**

The proposed CE is generally well-maintained with few issues. However, the implementation of a new rest-rotation grazing system to meet FWP's Minimum Standards for Grazing may require the construction of water infrastructure or fences. While additional costs would be associated with adding additional rangeland infrastructure, the construction of new fences would allow the landowner to conform to wildlife-friendly fencing design, and better allow the department to implement recommendations and direction associated with SO 3362 to conserve big game winter range and movements.



Figure 1. Location of proposed Everson Bench CE in relation to boundary of HDs 426/471, the town of Denton, and the Beckman Wildlife Management Area in Fergus County.

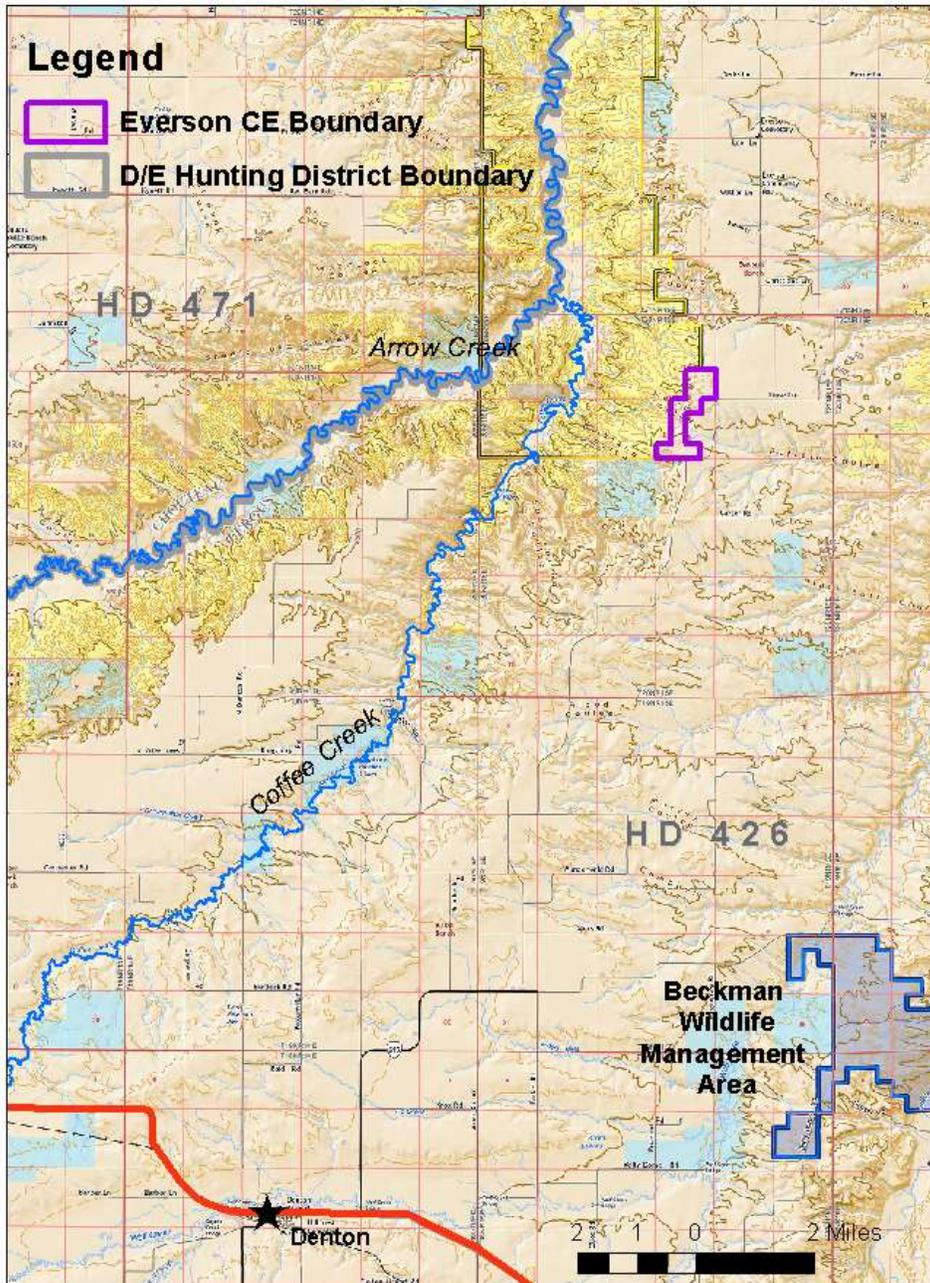


Figure 2. The proposed Everson Bench CE, its associated leased public lands, and the access it provides to adjacent public lands in relation to the 2010 Moline CE.

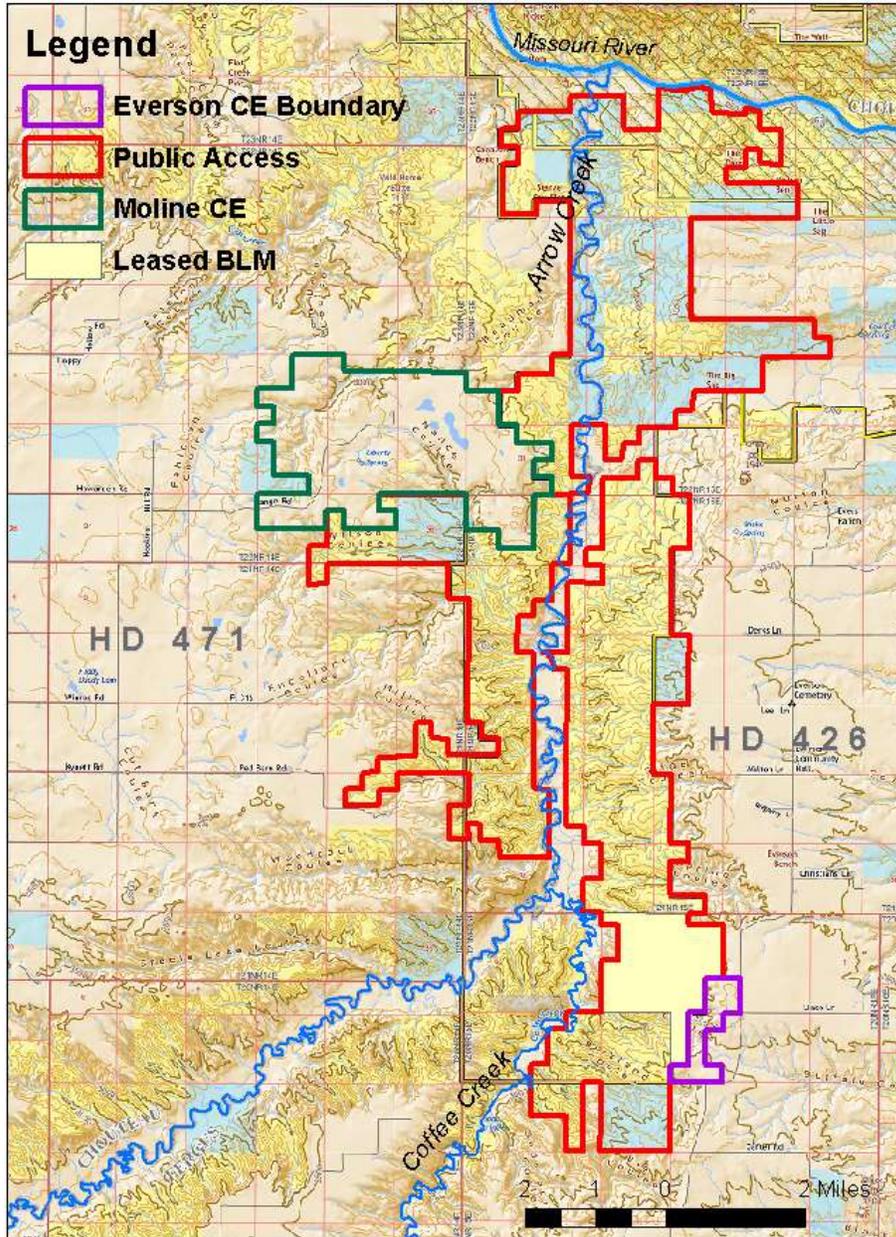


Figure 3. Landcover types present on the 440-acre proposed Everson Bench CE.

